

The Builder.

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THE current number of the *Westminster Review* is disfigured by a very ill-natured article on the new Houses of Parliament,—an article wholly devoid of that high and generous feeling which, even while pointing out errors or shortcomings, ought to be exhibited towards the most extensive, arduous, and finest work of our own time,—and appears to have little other purpose besides finding fault, and so gratifying what would really seem to be a personal or party pique. The ground of this inference, which the very excellent conductor of the *Review* in question will probably think derogatory to the character of his journal, is the following, and appears to us irrefragable. We could perfectly understand, and perhaps admit the force of, many objections, which might be raised by one who passed over the building alternately praising and deploring, and might even admit as possible, good faith, impartial judgment, and absence of bias, in one who saw more to find fault with than to praise, however much we might differ with him;—but when a critic, in commenting on the work to the extent of about fifteen pages of letter-press (the remainder of the article relates to other structures—the British Museum, Buckingham Palace, and the Royal Exchange), finds fault page after page, without discovering anything to admire—without a single word of applause and encouragement, or the slightest admission of ability displayed in this elaborate, and, in many respects, novel structure, the pains whereof to its architect none but an architect can rightly estimate,—the candid mind cannot believe in his impartiality, and is led to suspect the predominance of personal feelings throughout.

The main objections which the writer urges are excessive decoration and want of height:—

“So unaccountable, indeed,” he says, “has been the inattention to this latter quality, that it almost seems as if the architect had been able to waste it and give it away, since the level of the basement-moulding, from not having been properly attended to, appears likely, as it proceeds westward from the clock-tower towards Parliament-street, there to lose itself in the ground, from the rise of the earth, or to run so close to it as to be deprived of its just effect. If this is so, it is unaccountable. The ground-line should have been the same as that of Westminster Abbey, or Canning’s statue. The suggestion was made to Mr. Barry. The objection that the level of Westminster Hall was too low was anticipated; it was proposed to raise the Hall (it is 8 feet below the base of the statue). Had this been done, the building, instead of being now sunk, as in a well, by the side of Westminster-bridge, would have been nearly on a level with the ground at the foot of it. A few hundred thousand extra cubic feet that might have been required for raising the basement some 3 or 4 feet would have been but a trifling addition to the cost of the whole building, in order to confer upon it that importance which it wants, and which is now sought to be attained by raising the towers beyond their original intention.”

The statements here made are not all correct, and the general inference is altogether an unfair one. The defect in apparent height

belongs to the site, and not to the building, which is higher than most modern edifices,—practically, indeed, too high, as those who have to attend parliamentary committees know to their cost. The base-moulding of the south elevation will be 6 feet above the ground when the levels of the adjoining streets are altered as intended,—it is at present 4 feet.

It was suggested to Mr. Barry, the writer says, that the ground-line should have been the same as that of Westminster Abbey or Canning’s statue; but, as the writer probably knows, Mr. Barry had no power to avail himself of the suggestion. Cost had to be considered. If the ground-line had been raised 8 feet as here suggested, it would have added at least 150,000*l.* to the expenditure, and the building would still have been 12 feet below the roadway of the bridge at the foot of it, and not on a level with it, as the writer says. The ground-line, moreover, of Canning’s statue is but five feet above the level of Westminster Hall, not 8 feet, as stated, which would have made the advantage even less.

Nothing short of an extra elevation of 14 or 16 feet would suffice to obviate the defect caused by the bridge, if the bridge is to be allowed to remain as it is, as is proved by the reviewer himself, when he says, that even now that the roadway has been lowered several feet “an omnibus passenger will discover the Serjeant-at-arms at breakfast on the first floor.”

“The original design,” continues the objector, “was calculated for five acres of ground, but the wants of the state, or rather the pretensions of those who serve it in waiting upon the legislature, and the aspiration of the architect, extended it, though in a horizontal direction only, so as to cover two more acres with masonry, but without any corresponding addition to the elevation. What might have been a fair proportion for five is not suitable for seven, but this reflection does not seem to have occurred in time. However, the towers are to produce great effect; we are told to wait, and see when they shall have arrived at their height how they will rescue the rest of the mass from its comparative humilitiy. This is doubtful.” To us it seems not doubtful at all: they cannot fail to carry upward the whole mass. As respects the enlargement of the site, one effect was to place the building further from the bridge. The principal front was but little increased in length, and an additional height was given to the building in consequence. To talk of raising the whole mass in proportion to the extension of area covered is nonsensical. The reviewer very unfairly compares the structure in respect of height with the Abbey—a building of different style—ecclesiastical instead of domestic, and, moreover, one of the loftiest edifices, even of its own kind, that we have. Practically, as we said before, the Houses of Parliament are already too high: the defect is in the site, and even here it will be greatly lessened when the bridge is rebuilt, the neighbouring levels altered, as proposed, and the elevated portions of the building carried up to their full extent.

In speaking of the excess of ornament on the exterior, the writer laments that the architect should not have understood that the value of all ornament, whether in architecture or in dress, depends much upon its being set off by some plain smooth space. “What a source of beauty,” says he, and with truth, “results from the exemplification of this principle in the buildings and attire of classical antiquity.

How the plain repose and shade of the cella in the temple set off the flutings and capitals of the columns that surround it; how the quiet architrave in the Doric brings out the richness of the sculptured frieze above. [Though, by-the-way, when the former was painted, and hung with shields, as was the case in the best examples, the illustration disappears.] Later, how impressive is the sparing ornament of the Norman style on the massive solids, surmounted by its strings and cornices, or pierced by its deeply-recessed apertures!” The palaces of Rome, too, he urges, derive almost the whole of their success from the contrast of the mouldings and decorations with the unbroken area. But what, after all, is this but saying that the Greek style of architecture, or the Norman style, or the Italian style, is not the Late Pointed style? The excess of ornament objected to, the universal panelling, and the absence of plain surfaces, are the very characteristics of the style and exemplars used, and the adoption of which, as the reviewer afterwards says, he perfectly approves of. The new houses are no rivals in this respect with Henry VII.’s chapel; the panelling is much larger, the carved ornaments are fewer than in that instance; and if we compare it with those to which it even more closely assimilates, the foreign *Hôtels de Ville* (Ghent, Louvain, and others, at once occur to us), the same may be said with equal truth.

The position of the Victoria tower, at its further extremity, he considers “now irretrievably wrong,” situated as it is, “at what is, and always must continue to be [there is no *must* in the case], the most remote corner of it.” The fact is, the position of the tower was dictated by the plan adopted by Mr. Barry, and is a question of judgment, to the soundness of which we must suppose the Commissioners subscribed when they adopted Mr. Barry’s plan rather than others which were submitted to them. There can be no doubt, too, that it was of the utmost consequence to the effect to be hereafter produced, to mark the extent of the building at this end, admitting it to remain the most remote corner, by a tower; further, it will be more striking than in a central position as being seen in its entire height. The writer flippantly observes that the tower appears “*stans pectus in uno*, doing an eternal sort of goose-step at one end of the building;—the blue sky seen corner-wise through the huge arch, which seems to lead to nothing, making it appear almost like the portal of heaven to the pilgrim on his way to a place most unlike that *cœrulean* region—the Nine Elms terminus of the South-Western Railway!” And again, “the mass now, with the huge height in the rear and the smaller towers in the north and centre, is something like a vessel under jury, main and foremasts, with a disproportioned mizen: a highly ornamented Bucentaur, with a standard pole erected in the stern!” The *animus* of a reviewer who, in speaking of this great work, can use such far-fetched, flippant, and childish comparisons is somewhat obvious. Mr. Barry in this grand structure has achieved as much as could be expected from any living architect, at home or abroad,—we ought perhaps to say more; and in the name of English art and English artists, we do strenuously protest against such a derogatory and contemptuous mode of dealing with such a work.

The reviewer does not join in the vulgar cry of delay, raised in the House of Commons by persons avowedly profoundly ignorant of art and its processes, to the extent of those gentle-